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DISCOURSE

PREACHED AT NEEDHAM,

OCTOBER 24, 1841.

BY REV. WILLIAM RITCHIE,

Pastor of the First Congregational Society in that Town.

BOSTON :

PUBLISHED BY BENJAMIN H. GREENE.

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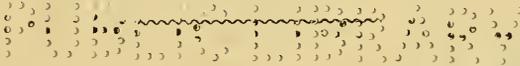
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NOTICE TO

DISCOURSE.

THERE WAS A GARDEN; AND IN THE GARDEN A NEW SEPULCHRE.

St. John's Gospel, xix. 41.

Two objects are here united the most dissimilar in their effect on the human mind; the one delightful and attractive, the other gloomy and repulsive. We associate every thing charming in our idea of a garden; but decay and darkness, separation and desolation are the natural associations with the tomb. Gardens, in which every rare and beautiful flower and every variety of delicious fruit has been cultivated, have among all civilized nations been highly valued. It was in a garden that our first parents were created, surrounded with delightful groves, fragrant and beautiful flowers, and delicious fruits. It is not therefore strange that their descendants should have cherished a desire to perpetuate the blissful scene of innocence and joy. The Romans were passionately attached to their extensive and richly cultivated gardens. Their opulent men had their gardens so situated in relation to their dwellings, that in every position in which they sat or reclined,

they could have a view of a portion of their beauties. The Jews also devoted much attention to the same object. To these our Saviour and his disciples often resorted. We read of his passing, after one of his consolatory discourses to his disciples, the brook Cedron, where was a garden, into which he entered and his disciples. Near the place where he was crucified was also a garden, in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man laid. There they laid Jesus, for the sepulchre was nigh at hand.

My text suggests to us how nearly connected are our joys and our sorrows. In the same garden of ever varying beauty and delight there is a sepulchre. I have not chosen this subject that I may dwell upon my own sorrows and afflictions; deep as they are, they are only the common lot of humanity. Some of you have experienced as great, yea greater; and there are those now connected with me, whose afflictions must have a far more blighting influence on their plans and prospects. At my time of life it is not to be expected that I could long enjoy the pleasure, great as it was, of the affections and attentions of departed children; but they were the joy of their husbands' hearts, intimately associated with all their purposes, and anticipating, according to the course of nature, a much longer and more interesting period of life and usefulness.

I said I had not now alluded to this subject, which you cannot but know fills my mind, that I might indulge a useless and wasting grief, but to express my gratitude for the sympathy felt for me and my family,

and the friendly aid afforded during the protracted sickness of the beloved object of our affection ; gone we doubt not, where sorrow and sighing flee away. As we all have either passed or may pass through similar scenes of trial, I have thought that both you and myself might derive important lessons of instruction from the subject which my text so interestingly presents.

1. The near connexion between our joys and sorrows impressively teaches us to rejoice as though we rejoiced not, and to weep as though we wept not ; that is, to moderate our joy and our sorrow. It is not necessary in order to do this to fill our minds with forebodings of undefinable scenes of sorrow or of joy in store for us. No, our only firm resting place is in correct views of the evanescent nature of every thing earthly, and in firm trust in the wisdom and goodness of the divine administration. If we love God, and trust in him as our Heavenly Father, who tenderly loves us, and never afflicts us but for our good, we shall commit all our friends and interests to his disposal, and feel happy that he permits us so to do. Then we can walk through the most pleasant garden which his love has prepared for our delight, enjoying the effects of his wisdom and goodness, admiring the beauty and order we behold, and not be alarmed at the tomb which frequently presents itself to our view ; because we connect them in our daily thoughts, and are persuaded that this is the appointment of paternal love. And although our prospects are often suddenly dark-

ened, and a deep shade is thrown over all which delighted us ; still we recognize the hand and love of Him whose ways are mysterious and past finding out, and feel that duty requires us to bow in submission to the perfect will of God. We are however frequently so unwise in the day of prosperity, when our children are about us, and the candle of the Lord shines upon our tabernacle, as to extend our views far into the future, the imagination raising one beautiful image beyond another to delight us, until the mind, bewildered and lost in the scene, forgets that we all dwell in houses of clay, and that our foundation is in the dust. In such scenes of earthly delight, which exist only in the imagination, we are poorly prepared for the sad reality of our condition, which is a checkered scene of joy and sorrow. In the day of adversity we are in danger of sinking too low, of feeling that all sources of consolation are dried up, and that no sorrow is like our sorrow. By wisely contemplating our condition we shall neither be too much elated in prosperity, nor too much depressed in adversity. We shall be led to see and rejoice that there are sources of pleasure which the world cannot affect ; that these are as unchangeable as God himself ; that they are in prosperity the life of all our joys ; in adversity and affliction a solace to all our sufferings ; and an unfailing source of hope and joy to the undying soul.

2. We are taught not to magnify objects in our grief, and in the delightful garden which God has promised, so to situate ourselves that the small tomb should not

obscure our prospect and destroy our enjoyment of the scene around us. When we move through the delightful walks of the garden, accompanying a beloved object of affection to the tomb, it cannot be expected that our eyes will be open to the most beautiful flowers which border our path. No; one absorbing object fills the soul, and every thing else is involved in a gloomy shade. But when the last sad office is performed, and we have sat down under the shadow of the tomb to mourn our loss; it becomes us to recollect, that this is the habitation of the dead, and not of the living; that duty calls us to arise and perform the work given us to do, that we may be prepared for the rest of the tomb, for the rest which remains for the people of God.

We may frequently visit the tomb. We may adorn the ground where our dead rest, and spread beauty over this region of desolation to our affections. And it seems strange that we should not endeavor to render more pleasant our associations with our beloved friends who are dead; strange that we should leave the place where they are deposited as if they were forgotten, or remembered only in connexion with every thing barren and uncultivated. But there are indications of a better taste in the community, and the habitations of the dead will, I trust, every where be rendered less repulsive; yes, and have a charm, which will invite all to walk among them with emotions, pleasing though mournful to the soul. Occasional visits to the tomb are salutary; but active duty is the business of life. By visiting the

graves of dear friends the mind is softened and rendered more susceptible of religious impressions, and we are aided in making the improvement we ought of solemn and afflictive events, and are thus quickened in the discharge of duty. But, what an effort is required to do this ! In our afflictions we are prone to look around upon multitudes who seem to be of little use in the world, who have few interested in them, and we can hardly forbear to wonder why one,* around whom so many tender affections cluster, one associated to friends with every thing interesting and pleasant in life, should so early be taken away ; yea, and why another* should follow in quick succession, whose loss to ourselves is almost equally severe, and to others even more afflictive and overwhelming, But this is altogether a wrong state of feeling, however spontaneously it rises in the mind of the deeply afflicted. It is a feeling prompted by erroneous views of the ways and providence of God. It leads us to murmur, and not to submit. And although few can avoid the thought, that it is strange and mysterious that we are thus deprived of those who were and might be, as long as we live, so blended with our existence and happiness, that all seems desolate without them ; yet on mature reflection we clearly perceive that it is far more agreeable to our condition as dependent, sinful beings, to feel grateful that God gave us such a treasure in our children, and that we were so long permitted to enjoy their society.

* See Notes A. and B.

They were all we could wish whilst living. Christians in profession and in character, they are now gone to hold communion with their God and Saviour, to engage in all the intellectual, moral, social, and religious employments of a higher state of being, where beloved sisters recognize each other and harmoniously unite in all those offices of affection and love so congenial to their characters.

Instead of repining that such undeserved blessings, only lent us for our joy and happiness, are recalled, ought we not to be filled with gratitude that we enjoyed them so long, that they have left on our minds so deep an impression of their worth? So long as memory remains, the pleasing vision of what they were will frequently pass over our minds, like the visits of angels, speaking peace, and calming the agitations of earth. This ought, my friends, to be always the view we take of bereavements under the providence of God. For myself, I feel that an immense debt of gratitude is due to Him who gave me such daughters; that instead of being more miserable in their early removal, than I should have been had I never possessed them, I not only have been, but, when the intensity of grief is past, always shall be happier for their existence. Such seem to me to be correct views of God's holy providence. They justify his dealings with us; reconcile our wills to his; and breathe calmness and resignation into the soul. The tomb shrinks back into its proper dimensions. Its dark shade is not permitted to extend over the beautiful garden of God. The mind rests

with confidence and peace on the rock of ages. The wise and good Governor of the universe does all things well, and will make all things, if we are not wanting to ourselves, work together for our good.

3. What unspeakable consolation does the thought impart, that this tomb in the garden was the tomb where Jesus was laid! Dreary and desolate is the tomb of nature. Every son and daughter of Adam, deposited there, decays and wastes away. Man returns to the dust from whence he was taken. Hence the heathen world conducted their dead to their last abode with the most bitter and heart-piercing lamentations. They mourned without hope. But blessed be God, christians can turn from this dreary abode, this everlasting night, to the tomb of Jesus, where the bright morning of resurrection dawns. And, behold, inscribed in legible characters, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live. The scene is changed. Life and immortality are clearly brought to light. We with the disciples stoop down to look into the tomb of Jesus; and behold, he is not there. The corruptible has put on incorruption; the mortal has put on immortality. Instead of darkness and desolation, all is light and beautiful. Angels are sitting there in all the brightness and splendor of immortality, inquiring, why seek ye the living among the dead? He has risen and become the first fruits of them that slept. What light and consolation have beamed forth from the tomb of Jesus to the christian world! How does it soothe

the pangs of separation to reflect that to be with Christ is far better than to dwell with the best earthly friends ; and we almost chide ourselves for our selfishness in wishing to retain those we love from higher enjoyments than earth affords. But frail humanity must mourn ; it is impossible when loved ones are called away, not deeply to feel their loss. Were it otherwise, the purpose of God in their removal, our improvement and sanctification, could not be accomplished. But although we must feel, and deeply feel, when we sustain the loss of dear friends, the consolations of christianity sustain and soothe the soul, and lead the mind from the dreary, desolate abode of the dead, to brighter regions beyond the grave. Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord : yea, saith the spirit, they rest from their labors, and their works do follow them. In my Father's house are many mansions, said Jesus ; if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you ; and if I go away I will come again and receive you unto myself ; that where I am, ye may be also. Enlightened by these discoveries, and animated with the prospects which religion unfolds, the christian will depart with tranquillity ; and partaking of the spirit of the world to come, the last scene will be full of peace and hope of a blessed immortality.

NOTES.

A.

SOPHIA RITCHIE, daughter of Rev. William and Mrs. Clarissa Ritchie, born in Canton, Mass., January 11, 1819, was married to Nicholas Tillinghast, Esq., on February 25th, 1841, and died October 5th, 1841.

In intellectual, social, moral and religious qualities, and in her situation in life, she was all the fondest parents could have anticipated or wished. Devoted to her husband, they lived in each other's affections; and painful is the stroke which severs her from him and from her other friends. But there is solace in all our afflictions. Her life and death fill her friends with the joyful hope that she has entered that world of love and peace so congenial to her character. Her sickness was severe, and protracted for more than four months; and with the vigorous exercise of her intellectual powers to the last moments of life, and with all the attachments to life which youth and flattering prospects inspire, she endured her lot with great equanimity and christian patience, and closed life without a murmur.

B.

CAROLINE WHITAKER, daughter of the late Rev. Jonathan and Mrs. Mary Whitaker, born in Sharon, Mass., July 12, 1810, was married to James Ritchie in April, 1837, and died September 24, 1841.

From the New Orleans Picayune.

When the virtuous die, the hearts of all who loved them are wrung with grief,—the kind sympathies of friends, though grateful, cannot alleviate; and we turn from the insufficiency of earthly consolation, to

the all-wise Creator, who has seen fit thus to afflict us. But how much is the burden of our grief lightened, if the faith of the departed grew brighter in death, and when the agonizing pang of parting with the loved on earth was passed, the ready soul waited with impatient wing to be released for heaven! It was thus with her who has "gone from amongst us in silence down." She sleeps far away from her own New England, beneath the dark foliage of a southern land, but not unhonored or unwept. Her virtues won her a place in many hearts, where her memory shall be kept as a holy thing; and though few of her kindred were near to pay the last sad rites, yet there were many *sisters in affection* to weep for the loved and lost. And when the trials and afflictions of life shall come upon them, they will recall the example of one who never turned aside from the path of duty, however arduous; and the weariness and impatience of their hearts shall pass away.

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